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Théories

Kolnai's Disgust as Violation of Value

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INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive account of disgust needs to be aware of four interrelated components: “physical” disgust as an instinct-like reaction against offensive things;¹ a “moral” disgust that attacks certain social groups, habits, or values;² an “aesthetic” disgust representing its object as repugnant *and* captivating;³ and a “fundamental” disgust that highlights it as an integral part of our psyche,⁴ or even our being.⁵

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1. P. ROZIN, L. MILLMAN, C. NEMEROFF, “Operation of the Laws of Sympathetic Magic in Disgust and Other Domains”, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 50/4, 1986, p. 703-712; P. ROZIN, A. FALLON, “A Perspective on Disgust”, in *Psychological Review*, 94/1, 1987, p. 23-41; P. ROZIN, J. HAIDT, K. FINCHER, “From Oral to Moral”, in *Science*, 323 (27 February), 2009, p. 1179-1180; D. KELLY, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*, Cambridge–London, The MIT Press, 2011.
 2. M. DOUGLAS, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge, 2002 [1966]; M. NUSSBAUM, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton–Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2004; D. KELLY, *Yuck!...*
 3. W. MILLER, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, Massachusetts–London, Harvard University Press, 1997; W. MENNINGHAUS, *Ekel. Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999; C. KORSMEYER, *Savoring Disgust. The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*, Oxford–New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.
 4. S. FREUD, *Briefe an Wilhelm Fliess*, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer, 1986 [1887-1904]; Id., *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1996 [1905]; Id., “Das Unbehagen in der Kultur”, in *Gesammelte Werke (Chronologisch Geordnet). Vierzehnter Band: Werke aus den Jahren 1925-1931*, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag, 1948 [1929].
 5. J.-P. SARTRE, *La Nausée*, Paris, Gallimard, 2011 [1938]; Id., *L'Être et le Néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012 [1943].

Kolnai's 1929 essay touches upon all these issues. His phenomenological analyses delineate disgust from other "aversive emotions" by showing it is first and foremost concerned with characteristics (the *Sosein*) of objects. From here Kolnai enumerates many physical and moral categories of disgust that can affect consciousness in various ways and with varying intensities. In this manner, disgust is an aesthetic (i.e. a *Sosein*-aware) capacity that is repulsed—and often simultaneously captivated by—a given phenomenon, giving rise to feelings of contamination, excess, and corruption, upon which ethical judgements are also often made. Underlying all of this, Kolnai claims, is an ever-present experience of a disturbing mixture of life and death.

The above aspects are all vital for a proper understanding of disgust, but they ultimately need to be accentuated by paying attention to disgust as a particularly strong *violation of value*. Under this interpretation, disgust would always involve a strong offence to value in its formal structure, wherein a (temporary) dissolution of Kolnai's "metaphysical" distinction between ordered and purposeful existence on the one hand, and a meaningless, death-like form on the other, lies at the heart. Nevertheless, such a basic dissolution is often played out in more specific reactions wherein offences to particular values take centre stage. Here such values are reduced, *through* revolting qualities, into mere psychophysical stutterings before the offensive object or idea. This is because disgust essentially involves not only a (temporary) dissolution of the fundamental life-death distinction, but also a blurring between the psychical and the physical, as well as between the ideal and the real.

KOLNAI'S COMPARATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DISGUST

Through a comparative phenomenological analysis of three "defence reactions" (*Abwehrreaktionen*), Kolnai believes we may come to a proper understanding of each phenomenon, with disgust taking the conceptual "middle position".⁶

For Kolnai, "angst"⁷ simultaneously intends "two completely separate objects: what provokes it and the subject who experiences it".⁸ Angst therefore necessarily involves a double intention wherein there is a frightening object (first

6. A. KOLNAI, "Disgust", in *On Disgust: Aurel Kolnai*, ed. B. SMITH, C. KORSMEYER, Chicago, Open Court, 2004 [1929], p. 41; Id., "Der Ekel", in *Ekel, Hochmut, Haß: Zur Phänomenologie feindlicher Gefühle*, Frankfurt am Main, Surkamp Verlag, 2007 [1929], p. 18.

7. I stick with the more literal translation for the German *Angst*.

8. Id., "Disgust...", p. 36; Id., "Der Ekel...", p. 13.

intention) that nevertheless only has significance with “regard to myself”⁹ (second intention). Hereby angst always has a “teleological intent”,¹⁰ namely the safety of the self, in relation to which “flight is merely the instinctive culmination, the discharge”.¹¹ This means if the self isn’t actually in danger, then angst will be significantly diminished, or even non-existent.

For Kolnai, the most fundamental structural difference angst has with *disgust* is that the latter has a more or less *single*, not double, intentionality: “[t]he intention of disgust is much more markedly oriented outwards: in spite of its strong physiological effect, disgust lacks the powerful inwardly-aimed intentional flowing backwards”.¹² Much unlike angst, therefore, disgust “adheres to the object”¹³ in a manner that takes direct appraisal of the object’s *qualities* (its *Sosein*). This means considerations of the object’s *Dasein* (i.e. its more general existence), as well as of any given causal “state of affairs”, are of secondary, if of any, importance. Indeed, disgust is deemed an “aesthetic” emotion precisely because it “cares little for the actual existence of its object but is wholly occupied with the qualities experienced”.¹⁴ In other words, disgust is never *directly* concerned with existence.¹⁵ This is because it is more the repugnant *qualities* of the object that form the epicentre of the phenomenon. In Kolnai’s terminology: angst’s intentions are focused around *Dasein*; disgust’s intention around *Sosein*.

For Kolnai “disgust normally arises completely unequivocally as the only possible direct reaction to the object in question”.¹⁶ This is because the properties—the *Sosein*—of the disgusting object are the main triggers and can often be quite universal (paradigmatic example: faeces). With *hatred* the matter is rather different, because it is a more “spontaneous picking out or choosing of the object”¹⁷ that often involves certain (historical) events (e.g. a rejection of an amorous intention). Such events can be met with very diverse emotions (in this example: sadness, resentment, perplexity), meaning hatred’s object is often much more specific and is maintained much more by personal qualms and pains. More

9. *Ibid.*

10. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 37; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 14.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 39; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 15-16.

13. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 39; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 16.

14. B. SMITH, C. KORSMEYER, “Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust”, in *On Disgust...*, p. 9.

15. *Contra* Sartre.

16. A. KOLNAI, “Disgust...”, p. 41; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 18.

17. *Ibid.*

fundamentally, hatred “goes directly for what is hostile or evil, for the threat”¹⁸ in a manner that wishes “either to annihilate, or at least to weaken or transform its object”.¹⁹ Moreover, unlike disgust, hatred (like angst) cares more for the actual existence of the object, with the *Sosein* only being of secondary consideration: “once provoked [hatred] searches out the object in its whole essentiality”²⁰ in a manner whereby one can become completely consumed and obsessed with the object to the extent that one wishes it banished from existence. For Kolnai hatred is not some passing fit of dislike; “[t]he central and unifying act of hatred seems to me to be a self-imposed—or quasi-imposed and accepted—*commitment* to hostility”.²¹ Disgust, on the other hand, is satisfied so long as the offensive object is “out of sight and out of mind”.

Indeed, the “paradox of disgust”²² is that it holds a “middle position”²³ between angst and hatred: like angst disgust is a “genuine passive defence reaction”²⁴ that is triggered by the presence of something; but like hatred disgust does not flee the object properly speaking, but on the contrary, and almost in spite of itself, takes an *interest* in the thing before then creating a sufficient distance. The essential thing that begins this whole movement is the revolting qualities of the object—the *Sosein*.

KOLNAI’S TAXONOMY OF “THE DISGUSTING” AND ITS ETHICAL FUNCTION

“Physical” Disgust

According to Kolnai there are nine types of physically disgusting objects.²⁵ The analysis will here restrict itself to highlighting the most important themes through a few examples.

For Kolnai, the prototypical characteristic of disgusting objects is *putrefaction* (*Fäulnis*). Here there is an essential *process* of a “transition of the living into the state of death”.²⁶ This means death as such cannot be disgusting; it is always

18. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 33; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 10.

19. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 41; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 18.

20. *Ibid.*

21. A. KOLNAI, “The Standard Modes of Aversion: Fear, Disgust, and Hatred”, in *On Disgust...*, p. 106 (Kolnai’s emphasis).

22. A. KOLNAI, “Disgust...”, p. 41; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 18.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 52-62; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 29-38.

26. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 53; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 29.

the *organic in a state of decay* that offends us and blurs our more clear-cut rationalised distinction between life and death. Putrefying things are thus experienced as disgusting because they show us that even in death the eternal circle of decay as a meaningless, pseudo-living process, is ever-present. In Kolnai's words, dead stuff is never disgusting for its "*mere non-functioning*";²⁷ on the contrary what is revolting is that death *does not bring about annihilation or closure*, but just so many more activities that are devoid of any real meaning for us. This strange "augmentation of life"²⁸ in death gives us the disturbing "heightened announcement of the fact that life *is there*"²⁹ *still*³⁰—our bodies are never really eradicated, but merely *rearranged*; we just return to the cosmic muck with the very keen sense that "worms devour us".³¹

Such is the theoretical background of disgust as putrefaction. However, is such theory explicitly present in all concrete cases? Of course not. Indeed, there seems to be *two moments* involved in disgust-reactions: the first is simply a reaction whereby one instantly recognises the object as disgusting; and then, secondly, if one is really pressed on *why* such sights, smells, and processes evoke disgust, then answers may finally alight upon lamentations about the senselessness of such processes. Such "senselessnesses" offend our rationalisations of what life and death *should be*, ideally.³² Such a secondary moment may only arise after reflection, although it can—and even must—be theoretically presupposed to really articulate *why* we find such things as rotting corpses disgusting. In this manner, "[t]here exists an image of putrefaction as an optical-tactile-olfactory formation which [...] possess[es a] structural unity"³³ that revolts us, simply and sensuously, and which can more or less "stand alone", pushing theoretical reasons into the background. In other words, putrefying stuff disgusts us because it smells, looks, and feels horrible; and if asked why this is so, answers may arise where the "deeper" issues of blurred distinctions between life and death, matter and psyche, real and ideal, may *then* arise—and may even have always *already* been conceptually present, if but only implicitly.

27. *Ibid.* (Kolnai's emphasis (except the "mere" ("bloßes") in the German original)).

28. *Id.*, "Disgust...", p. 53; *Id.*, "Der Ekel...", p. 30.

29. *Ibid.* (emphasis only in the English translation).

30. This "still" is my emphasis.

31. "Ruin and death, he thought, cover all. The life of man ends in the grave. Worms devour us." V. WOOLF, *Orlando: a Biography*, Orlando, Harcourt, 2006 [1928], p. 53.

32. Cf. W. MENNINGHAUS, *Ekel...*, p. 12-13.

33. A. KOLNAI, "Disgust...", p. 53; *Id.*, "Der Ekel...", p. 29.

With excrement and bodily secretions, we see similar fundamental themes arise again, although with important additions and differences. For Kolnai our strong disgust at excrement revolves around the fact that life-processes exist in a manner where *surplus*, and not eradication, is once again the dominant theme. With faeces, it is not about sheer, brute activity (as in putrefaction), but more the *mere presence* of something inert and obtrusive that nevertheless signifies a remnant of a necessity of life that is no longer—or never was—desired. Such “remnants” are often too much for our tender notions of cleanliness, order, and propriety to take. Excrement hereby blurs the border once again between structured, purposeful living activities; and inert, meaningless things that simply are there before, during, and after such activities. In this manner the relationship between life and death comes full circle: the processes of life more often than not produce an *excess of stuff* that, although vital for such processes, in themselves resemble inert, dead stuff.

With reference to foods, the main theme to highlight is that of *satiety*, which is a disgust of a slightly different kind than previous ones (disgust at *Sosein*). Satiety occurs when the object, at the beginning, is *not disgusting at all*, but is on the contrary completely desirable or delectable. The object only *becomes* disgusting through too much, through overindulgence. Of course, a large dinner does not always need to end in such a manner, but in many cases “too much of a good thing” can be experienced as a kind of overdose or excess, in which one may feel—literally—weighed down or overwhelmed by the *pleasurable* excess that one has just engaged in.³⁴ In this manner, satiety is a sub-category of excess in which something that is inherently enjoyable has become—and can even remain—repugnant through overindulgence.

Disgust at food in terms of *Sosein* normally entails so many differences between individuals and cultures that it is very difficult to find any common underlying point. Religious sanctions and practices; personal or social values; as well as personal habits, upbringing, and dislikes, may all play very influential roles to the extent that one (type of) food may be revolting to one individual or group, and quite delicious to the next. Also, if asked why one finds some food disgusting, the *Sosein* of that particular item might even be bypassed, resulting in anything from “I simply don’t like it”, to “it’s so wrong to eat that”. Here we may

34. From this perspective, disgust must be a very important factor in both anorexia and bulimia, in which the idea of satiety takes on a very radical form, even to the extent that *any* food (anorexia)—or the digestion thereof (bulimia)—is “too much”.

suggest that, structurally speaking, foods are as highly value-conditioned as anything else, and then, depending on the given individual or culture, those foods and food-practices which violate such values and traditions are precisely the ones that are deemed revolting.

There also exists a rather strange practice that Kolnai dubs the “eroticism of disgust”,³⁵ in which disgusting (qualities of) foodstuffs are “flirted with”, sought after, or even cultivated. Again, such “delicacies” can vary greatly, but here there is a common thread: smells, tastes, and even textures that we would normally find revolting (at least in a large quantity) are developed and even enjoyed as a kind of *über-refined* “*haut-goût*”.³⁶ Highly pungent cheese is the best example, wherein bacteria and a process of putrefaction are actually *introduced* in order to give the food that “extra-special” taste. In this we see that the *ambivalent* attitude in disgust has almost come full-circle, precisely because it is the disgusting qualities that makes the item *even more* special and desirable, to the extent that the item is not experienced—by some at least—as “disgusting” at all, but on the contrary as “delectable”, “delicious”, or even “sublime”.³⁷

For Kolnai, (characteristics of) the human body, when *stripped* of its desirability or personality, can evoke varying degrees of disgust, ranging from violent revulsion (unwanted sexual advances—or even rape), to mild feelings of distaste (sitting down on a warm, recently-vacated tram-seat is one of Kolnai’s examples).³⁸ Kolnai notes here that it is the *obtrusiveness* of an *unwanted* or *undesired* (quality of a) body that “makes itself felt too much *as a body*”³⁹ and *nothing else*. This often leads to a kind of suffocating feeling that can be quite discomforting, or even totally horrifying. Thus, when the desire of another obtrudes or even invades in a brutal manner, wherein the body is “devoid of that ‘human’ role which makes it acceptable”,⁴⁰ we can feel disgust precisely because such advances are *not welcomed*, and yet are nevertheless *there*, pressing themselves upon us, quite literally. Such phenomena highlight the fragility of our borders, both mental and physical, which shows that disgust often involves a

35. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 60; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 36.

36. *Ibid.*

37. For more on the relationship between disgust and the sublime, cf. W. MENNINGHAUS, *Ekel...*, particularly his chapter on Kant.

38. A. KOLNAI, “Disgust...”, p. 61; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 37.

39. *Ibid.* (emphasis only in the English translation).

40. *Ibid.*

transgression of boundaries that we don't want, a transgression that fills us with feelings of contamination and revulsion.

"Moral" Disgust

Kolnai names five categories of the "morally disgusting".⁴¹ Now, in order to address the apparent ambiguity between "physical" and "moral", I must first note what precisely Kolnai means by "moral". Straight away he broadens such a notion to include all things *geistig*—i.e. "mental or spiritual".⁴² In this manner, although many mental—"moral"—disgust-reactions *may* have ethical overtones (thus taking "ethical" in a narrower sense than "moral"), they need not have in any *strict* sense. In short, the "should" in our moral disgusts is often looser and more personal than one would find in a more rigorous ethical system (e.g.: "One shouldn't eat meat because it's disgusting"). Even further: if one looks closer then *all* disgust is "moral" precisely because even the most basic—e.g. a bad smell—have mental components that signify a contamination or a breaking down of one or a number of values (cleanliness; a standard of taste; etc.). In this manner, values—things or ideas we hold dear—are the precise elements that create almost all of our "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" ("You should take a shower, otherwise that smell will linger"). Of course particular values vary from person to person—but a person completely *without* value is inconceivable.⁴³ Basic disgusting items like bad smells are almost universally disgusting therefore precisely because everyone has been taught to value traits such as personal hygiene. This is not to say that there is a universal standard of "personal hygiene"; it is merely to say humans and their social groups all have standards and rituals of purity, cleanliness, and the like, although they may vary greatly in the particulars.⁴⁴

Kolnai's "moral" disgusts, precisely because they are less anchored in very basic natural behaviours and practices, are in fact less universal, even to the extent that little or no disgust may be felt by certain individuals with regard to these matters. Nevertheless, the suggested structure remains: if someone is not disgusted at lying or stupidity, for instance, then this is because they do not particularly value honesty or intelligence.

41. Cf. Id., "Disgust...", p. 63-72; Id., "Der Ekel...", p. 39-47.

42. Id., "Disgust...", p. 62; Id., "Der Ekel...", p. 39.

43. Even a complete indifference to all value is, if even possible, still a form of valuing, or at least a form of "anti-valuing".

44. Cf. M. DOUGLAS, *Purity and Danger...*

Turning to Kolnai's commentary, when one studies lying and sycophancy,⁴⁵ for instance, here there exist forced ways of behaving that conceal more sinister levels. In other words, a liar or sycophant "seeks to subdue me"⁴⁶ by hiding the truth (in lying) or some hidden agenda (in sycophancy). Of course a perfect liar or sycophant would never be discovered, but in more everyday cases there are normally signs of an underlying mockery of *our* values (honesty, openness, respect, and so on). This means that if we are to submit to such lies or flattery then we are implicitly allowing a besmirching of the values we apparently live by, and can thereby feel quite contaminated. And even if we do not submit we may be revolted by the fact that the liar or sycophant does not seem to cherish the same values we do. Such characters thus possess a *Sosein* that often does come across as squirmy and "wormlike"—in short, not to be trusted.⁴⁷

Corruption is another phenomenon that Kolnai devotes quite a bit of attention to; it is disgusting when selfish values (monetary gain, a quest for power) *masquerade* as more altruistic ones (societal progress, honesty, (political) integrity). The "masquerading" is vital here, for if one were to brazenly assert the more selfish values ("I don't care about my constituents; only about my own monetary gain"), then one's audience simply would not lend its support. Indeed, corruption can only exist when there is a more insidious "[counterfeiting] of values",⁴⁸ wherein selfish values are the real driving forces that nevertheless *hide behind* some altruistic masks. The language of contamination and putrescence is rife again here: society, political systems, individuals can all be rotten in a manner that is ultimately (self-)destructive.

Kolnai's last category of "moral softness" seems to encapsulate all he has to say on moral disgust. Basically the "morally disgusting" is when there is either an overindulgence in a specific activity that atrophies more productive and balanced ways of existing; or when there are hidden, sinister aims and ways of being that distort, pollute, or offend a more well-ordered and honest form of existing. For

45. It is interesting how "sycophancy" has now been replaced by more obvious disgust-related terms ("brown-nosing", "ass-licking") in today's common usage.

46. Id., "Disgust...", p. 69; Id., "Der Ekel...", p. 44.

47. One of the best examples of such a character is Dickens's Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield* (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1992 [1850]), who always professes to be so very "umble" (humble), but is in fact a hate-filled, power-hungry person who is constantly striving to "worm his way to the top" through falseness, subterfuge, and pandering. And of course, once "at the top" he would enact his revenge on those he detests (which are many).

48. A. KOLNAI, "Disgust...", p. 69; Id., "Der Ekel...", p. 45. Translation modified: "Vortauschen von [...] Werten."

all of these Kolnai's value-realism is required; there needs to be an actual—almost metaphysical—structure of how people *should be* (balanced, ordered, honest, benevolent, trustworthy), which *then* gets corrupted and offended in reactions of disgust.

However, a question remains: can disgust really deliver clear-sighted judgments on such a level? Is it not, like many recent authors have claimed, too erratic, too irrational, and too prejudiced to have any real authority?⁴⁹ Kolnai's answer comes when he distinguishes between the “moral” and the “ethical”; in the latter disgust plays an important, though conditioned, role.

Disgust's Ethical Function

For Kolnai the link between disgust's ethical function and a justified “ethical condemnation”⁵⁰ is rather “equivocal”⁵¹, as it is for any other brute emotion (such as anger and fear). This is to say that disgust has such a felt immediacy that it lacks a full, thought-out rationality. This means that although disgust can recognise morally repugnant character(istic)s, it nevertheless does not have a truly conceptual grasp of ethical wrongdoing. In this manner, disgust can only stand “in irregular service [to] the morally good”;⁵² it can only be an *indicator* of *some* morally repulsive character(istic)s, most notably the “morally ‘putrid’ or ‘putrescent’”.⁵³ Such “indicators” are by no means a sufficient and fully justified rational appraisal of ethical matters; nonetheless, it is *precisely* due to its immediacy that disgust can contribute something vital to ethics.

In order to demonstrate these points, Kolnai gives another comparative analysis of disgust in relation to its more conceptual, ethically justified cousin—*contempt* (*Verachtung*). For Kolnai contempt is a “judgment-feeling”⁵⁴ that “presupposes an unfavourable judgment about its object”⁵⁵ in a manner where it “is directed not simply towards what partakes of disvalue, but much more to-

49. For instance: M. NUSSBAUM, *Hiding from Humanity...*; D. KELLY, *Yuck!...*

50. A. KOLNAI, “Disgust...”, p. 81; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 56.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 82; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 56.

55. *Ibid.*

wards the [low], the [ignoble], the [incompetent], the [failing]”.⁵⁶ This means that although contempt can function outside the ethical sphere; and although it by no means covers all ethical appraisals, it has an important function in disapproving of actions and characteristics that are not of an adequate robustness for what Kolnai considers to be proper ethical living.

Even further: Kolnai states that contempt is only possible for someone “in the habit of making judgments”,⁵⁷ as well as the fact that contempt “bears its [own] self-justification”⁵⁸ within itself. This is because if one were to realise that the object of contempt is in fact not “low” and “ignoble”, then the contempt would automatically disappear. Contempt thus serves, for Kolnai, as a kind of rational filter on the border of (many aspects of) the (im)moral and the ethical, which means contempt is an authentic and justified conceptual mechanism that operates upon sound judgements and relates to the proper, objective value-system of Kolnai’s realist ethics.

There is a complexity, however: although contempt can have an authoritative and powerful function with regard to some ethical judgements, it “also seems to contain in its straightforward feeling-character something that goes beyond the disapproving judgment: a [tinge] of the biological, a [hint] of disgust itself”.⁵⁹ There may be many judgements of contempt that do not “awaken” any explicit feelings of disgust (for example, contempt at “pettiness”)⁶⁰—and yet, because both disgust and contempt *look down upon* something that is offensive to one’s values (which in contempt are rationally justified), then “general contempt presupposes [a] moment or tonality of disgust”⁶¹ in which this latter has primacy in the order of immediacy. In other words, disgust is often the sensuous, felt “data” upon which the conceptual moment of contempt is based, or with which it is coupled. In this manner, disgust and contempt are often of a piece, with disgust being the more immediate and spontaneous, and contempt the more conceptual and reflected-upon. This is why Kolnai calls contempt a “formalized, cooled, and

56. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 82; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 57. Translation modified: “Richtet sich nicht sowohl schlechterdings auf das Wertwidrige als vielmehr auf das Geringe, Unvornehme, Unfähige und Versagende.”

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.* Translation modified: “[S]chein auch [...] in ihrer schlichten Gefühlsmäßigkeit etwas über das ablehnende Urteil hinaus zu enthalten, einen Stich ins Biologische, eine Anflug vom Ekel selbst.”

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

regulated disgust⁶² in that disgust more often than not serves as a kind of *raw material* upon which contempt then reflects and makes judgements, thereby filtering out the rationally unjustifiable disgusts, and transforming the valid ones into more conceptual negative judgements regarding a given ethical situation, act, or character.

Disgust is therefore in need of contempt in ethics in order to organise and filter disgust's "extra-ethical emotions of taste";⁶³ and contempt without the raw materials that disgust provides, would, *à la Kant*,⁶⁴ be empty.⁶⁵

With the rational ethical filter of contempt in place, one can see which disgusts fall outside the realm of ethics; which should be overcome; and which are justifiably contemptible. First there are those objects that are "disgusting by their very nature",⁶⁶ such as "waste products"⁶⁷ and putrefying organisms. These simply *are* disgusting, thanks to their *Sosein*. Then there are those objects that "become [disgusting] only under certain special circumstances".⁶⁸ There is not much that can be done with regard to the first category;⁶⁹ with the second, however, there is much room for leeway. First of all one may find some food, some animal, or some person "disgusting", but here the specific context or form is much more important, in the sense that under—even slightly—different circumstances it could—and even should—be otherwise. This means that "[i]n situations of this kind revision of the attitude towards disgust is, as a matter of principle, more appropriate".⁷⁰ And such "revision" is even *demande*d when it comes to

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Id.*, "Disgust...", p. 83; *Id.*, "Der Ekel...", p. 58.

64. I. KANT, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg, Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1967[1871/1877], A50/B74.

65. In fact, by extension one may suggest that nearly all conceptual ethical appraisals are in need of such emotional "raw materials". For instance: a justified fear or anger at someone is surely present only once one has been hurt and/or damaged by a given party; and an understanding and charitable disposition towards someone surely arises only out of a sympathetic sadness for the wrongs they have suffered. Indeed, the ethical always seems to involve such sentiments at their base, which are then filtered and organised by more conceptual principles and values that by definition disapprove or reprehend whole classes of acts and characters. The disgust-contempt dynamic would thus be one such case.

66. A. KOLNAI, "Disgust...", p. 86; *Id.*, "Der Ekel...", p. 61.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. Perhaps a nurse will have a mitigated disgust when changing bedpans for instance, but (s)he will never, unless quite perverse (in the technical Freudian sense), actually enjoy it.

70. *Ibid.*

ethical judgements. One may, for instance, find a disfigured face rather unsettling, even disgusting; but after such a knee-jerk reaction⁷¹ most people are able to see that such an “unattractive” quality by no means defines the person, and so the negative reaction can and should be quelled, and over time (if the person is likeable) could even completely vanish—or *even* become a quality of the person that constitutes part of their unique amiable personality. Thus an ethically justified contempt at a disfigured face is unthinkable for Kolnai. In short: there are some things that simply are disgusting and are not a concern for ethics (*e.g.* waste products); those things that may but should not be (*e.g.* a deformed face); and those that may transform into an ethically valid contempt if one is thinking correctly (*e.g.* corruption).

In this manner, Kolnai has quite a balanced conclusion: disgust is “something meaningful and legitimate in itself, which when yielded to in an uncontrolled way may also bar us from many of the values of life and hinder us in the performance of many noble deeds, and which should, accordingly, be subjected to repeated scrutiny, to repeated honing and illumination”.⁷²

FINAL REMARKS

Kolnai notices a tension between “a metaphysical reality”⁷³ of how brute nature simply *is*, or at least *conceived of*; and our “associative thinking”⁷⁴ thereupon. For Kolnai, there is “a metaphysical datum”⁷⁵ that notices a very real, objective distinction between two fundamentally different forms of life: a “redundant oscillation of life; and life which is structured by purpose”.⁷⁶ Disgust is precisely when the latter is confronted by, and even (somewhat) dissolved into, the former. Such is Kolnai’s metaphysical reality—and yet, on top of this basic distinction much “associative thinking” often follows.⁷⁷

The disgust-phenomenon wherein associative thinking is at its minimum, Kolnai states, is in “purely putrefactive disgust”.⁷⁸ This does seem very intuitive: the sight or smell of something rotting more often than not does not seem to go

71. This is not to say *all* people would have such a reaction.

72. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 90; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 64.

73. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 72; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 48.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*

77. Roquentin is battling with the same problem (*i.e.* describing brute existence) in *La Nausée*.

78. Id., “Disgust...”, p. 73; Id., “Der Ekel...”, p. 48.

beyond a spontaneous “ew!” or “yuck!” followed by a quick distancing from the object. Here the recognition of life-in-death is, at best, automatic or “unthought”; if asked *why* one finds such a sight or smell disgusting, it is highly doubtful one would go much beyond “it just is!”. It is highly unlikely, in other words, that one would say: “it reminds me that ultimately I’m worm-food too!”. Nevertheless, if pressed on the issue, a whole host of descriptions may occur that would ultimately signify Kolnai’s metaphysical distinction.

The distinction, however, seems even further removed and more metaphorical in some cases: for instance, in mendacity one would have to conceive lying as a kind of “death” of the normal, truthful way of life. Kolnai’s point here must be that although such a definition is not always explicitly apparent, disgust always involves—at least implicitly—a collapse of the most fundamental value-creator, namely the distinction between purposeful and meaningless life, which for him is a metaphysical reality.⁷⁹ “Metaphysical” because it is not immediately and explicitly contained in each concrete disgust-reaction, but once conceptually investigated it is clear that such reactions only exist because of such a basic structure, which all human beings can be aware of, and indeed live out immediately in their everyday disgust-reactions.

This also makes all disgust a violation of some value or other, because there are, on top of such a basic distinction, always some socially conditioned values (cleanliness; health; taste) that are clearly contaminated or violated in concrete instances. I may also suggest that disgust can be delineated from other potential “violations of value” (*e.g.*, anger) because the violation is so strong that the distinction between psychical and physical (or ideal and real) also breaks down, if only temporarily. To give an example: in anger a value is offended but it remains intact—one’s rants and raves are precisely the actions that fight against the infuriating object or deed, thereby fending off a proper contamination and collapse. In disgust, on the contrary, because more fundamental distinctions break down, one *cannot* even rant and rave, but can only gag and stare in disbelief at how one’s values have already been *reduced* to psychophysical stutterings before the nauseating image or phenomenon.

Such “collapses” have a wide spectrum in disgust, from light and transitory, to deep and enduring. Each individual case also entails offences to more specific values, where the brute *Sosein*—always the trigger—fills one with a physicality that reduces one’s ideals of life, purpose, and order to facial grimaces and feelings

79. I must thank Prof. N. de Warren for his comments regarding these points.

of contamination and violation. Thus disgust is a violation of value wherein bodily spasms and stutters represent an *invasion* of an offending object or idea into one's very values. This is always triggered by brute and unsettling visions or things that always ultimately signify a blurring and collapsing of our more clean-cut distinctions between life and death, ideals and brute contingencies, as well as the mind and raw physicality.

In this manner disgust as violation of value is a structural presupposition that helps explicate many disgust-reactions, although it often remains unreflected-upon with regard to many individual cases or people. In short, we state that there is always some offended value *underlying* any disgust-reaction, even the most basic. For if I say "it stinks", this implies I prefer, or value, pleasant smells; and if I say "that's filthy", it is because I like my own conception of cleanliness. Ultimately this is because we all value life in particular, specific ways; and we react violently when the phenomena of the world run counter to, and even invade, such ideals. This explains the universality of disgust (everyone has values, founded upon a basic "life-conception"); but also its great diversity (particular, concrete values vary enormously).

As a note for further research, the reasons for the diversity of disgust are dependent upon many factors, including: the particular value under attack; how dearly the value is clung to (or not); whether there is an underlying desire or drive reinforcing—or even going contrary to—this value; and the extent to which the disgusting phenomenon, *as well as* the value, are (re)presented as imaginary. Such reflections would take us beyond Kolnai, and into Freud and Sartre. In Freud lies a theory of brute drives that are always already conditioned by socio-psychological factors in a manner that creates values which are often at odds with the original drives. In Sartre lies a theory of values that can often involve imaginary, even "magical" ideals towards which we always strive—but which are, once again, always challenged and confronted in our daily emotional lives by a more brute form of being that is in fact *without value*.

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